Feedback mechanisms and student engagement in long-thin modules

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Overview

Within a second-year option module 'Social Inequalities', we designed different approaches to formative assessment and feedback provision.

Each approach utilised tools available within the Yorkshare VLE:

1. Submitting a short essay via TurnItIn and receiving a model answer via adaptive release if the essay was submitted before the deadline.

2. Using a group blog to organise a presentation, with feedback on the presentation posted by the tutor on the blog.

3. Posting a plan for an individual/group presentation to a blog and receiving group feedback on the plan in class.

4. Posting a short essay to a private journal and receiving individual feedback within the private journal.

At the time of writing, we can provide results on the first three approaches.

Rationale

Primarily, we wished to encourage students' independent learning by providing structured formative tasks which, particularly in the Spring term, prepared students for the summative assessment. We wanted to offer students a way of submitting work and receive feedback in an efficient way, without a substantial administrative increase on tutor workload.

Timeline

This timeline represents the academic year for this module. Week 6 in the Autumn and Spring terms are reading weeks, where students continue to work and are supported by staff as required. Non-teaching weeks are Week 1 of each term and vacations, where there is no scheduled face-to-face teaching.

The formative assessment tasks are embedded throughout the year, with face-to-face elements scheduled as part of the fortnightly seminar timetable and online elements able to be completed in weeks where the students are not expected to attend seminars.

| Start of ac. year | Post presentation work plan to blog [2] | Deliver presentation [2] | Post presentation plan to blog [3] | Post short essay to private journal [4] | Deliver presentation [3] |

| Sign up to groups [2] | Short essay task [1] | Feedback on presentation posted to blog [2] | Oral feedback on plan [3] | Post feedback to private journal [4] |

End of module assessment deadline Summer Week 6

■ Lecture/seminar week   ■ Reading week   ■ Non-teaching week   [Approach]

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Approach 1: Short essay, automated feedback

- 400 word essay
- Submit to TurnItIn
- Model answer released

Student comments

- ✓ Available quickly
- ✓ Can be submitted remotely
- ✓ Useful for comparing

- ✗ No individual feedback
- ✗ Unsure what was good/bad about own work
- ✗ Would have preferred essay plan/structured essay

Do you like the idea of a 'model answer' as a type of feedback on your work?

Don't Know 1
No 9
Yes 13

Engagement

Number of students who submitted: 78%

Approach 2: Presentation, written feedback

- Blog space for planning group presentation
- Presentation delivered in class
- Feedback posted by tutor to group blog

Student comments

- ✓ Ease and flexibility of group work outside normal hours
- ✓ Feedback given privately to just the group
- ✓ Can refer back to work and feedback

- ✗ Requires 'buy-in' within group to use the blog for sustained planning

Do you like the idea of feedback on group presentations being provided via a secure group blog on the VLE?

Don't know 4
No 4
Yes 15

Engagement
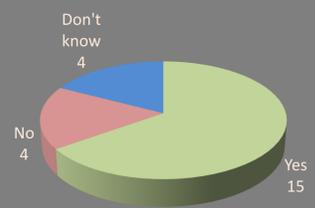
All 8 groups used the blog for initial contact.

Number of groups who submitted a work plan to blog: 7/8

Approach 3: Presentation plans, oral feedback

- Blog space for planning group presentation
- Plan submitted via group blog space
- Feedback on plan given by tutor in class

Student comments

- ✓ Offers face-to-face interaction for students to follow up on feedback
- ✓ Addresses the whole group

- ✗ Feedback is heard by all groups
- ✗ Difficult to relay feedback to absent group members

Do you like the idea of feedback being provided orally in seminars?

Don't know 2
No 1
Yes 19

Engagement

Number of groups/individuals who used the blog in some way: 14/16

Number of groups/individuals who submitted a presentation plan to blog: 12/16

Recommendations

- Clearly sign-post and structure activities, tools and deadlines
- Use online tools to collect work from students
- Flag-up when feedback has been provided online
- Allocate groups rather than allow students to choose

Comment

The model answer provided a structured learning activity with a fast form of feedback, which the majority of students undertook. However, students indicated a need for more individual feedback and reported they were unclear how to judge whether they were on the right track using a model answer. This could be addressed by developing students' abilities to learn from literature how to develop their own academic writing style.

For presentations students were asked to form groups using a sign-up wiki. However, failure to complete this within a suitable time-frame and subsequent group shifting introduced a management burden on the tutor. The presentation tasks have also highlighted a need for group-work training for students early on in the programme.

Students particularly favoured the oral feedback, which also allowed students an immediate dialogue with the tutor to clarify particular points.